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ABSTRACT

As more organizations reduce their human resources management (HRM) staff and look for ways for fewer employees to do more work, interest in developing electronic career support for employees is increasing. An Intranet-based solution uses technology to provide the means for bringing career development support to employees' workstations or their home computers. The outcome for individuals accessing such systems should be a strategic approach for making personal and professional plans based on the needs of their work setting. As people increasingly accept their employers' message that they are responsible for their own careers, their expectations that their employer will provide information, tools, and resources to conduct the required career planning are also increasing. Electronic career systems benefit employers and employees alike. An interactive planning system could include a career-planning section and life planning section. The career development system might include sections devoted to the following: career planning, life planning, employee resources, HRM/line manager support, and employer data. Within the career-planning section, the following stages could be included: searching and self-analyzing one's current situation; exploring the analysis results; exploring one's own information resources; setting career goals; and implementing career actions. Although such systems need continual management, they are highly cost effective. (MN)

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Strategies for Electronic Career Support to Employees

by Paul Stevens

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Strategies for Electronic Career Support to Employees

by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Worklife Network

In-company career development programs have been growing in incidence since the early 1980s. The general pattern has been for organisations to build career development support around career planning workshops, training managers in career coaching, stocking career centres with self-help resources and retaining providers for one-to-one assistance to unravel valued employees' career confusions. In some cases, organisations have used a combination of these.

Most organisations now, however, have flatter structures, reduced HRM staffing and fewer employees doing more work, and in different ways. Many have increased their subcontractor or part-time workforce, yet want to involve them in feeling part of the organisation. A consequence of restructuring how personnel are employed is resistance to releasing them for day long or longer period career development learning events such as workshops.

Roles for full-time helpers dedicated to career support rarely survive the prevailing cost justifi-

cation scrutiny. Interest is growing in ways by which delivery of career development and other HRM services can be provided to employees electronically via in-company Intranet.

An Intranet-based solution uses technology to provide the means for bringing career development support to the employees' workstations or even to their home PCs. This concept reduces the need for spending learning time away from workstations and can provide access-at-will career enrichment self-help resources.

The outcome for a person accessing the system should be a strategic approach for making personal and professional plans based on their motivation and ability as well as the needs of their work setting. Among the firms who have ensured this takes place in their Intranet systems are Raychem, Pacific Bell, Sun Microsystems and Hewlett Packard in the USA. In these organisations the use of technology in this way is substantially reducing, but not totally eliminating, the amount of employer-funded face-to-face career support.

The new world of work

A revolution is taking place in the way work is structured within organisations. Charles Handy, William Bridges, Jeremy Rifkin, Cliff Hakim and others have been forewarning us in publications and lecture tours about workplace change. Now these changes are here. Some organisations have already implemented them, others are planning to or choose to hold onto 'old ways' of organising how work should be done. Some have missed the messages and are in danger of their own fatality.

Radical change is occurring in how people are engaged in work tasks. Jobs per se are disappearing, job descriptions are becoming an antiquity—no longer relevant—job titles are moving towards outmoded irrelevancy. People are being engaged as members of a contingent workforce—in some situations work may be done on an employer's site, some home-based. More people are working as revolving members of project teams in multi-task roles. No wonder staff feelings are becoming more unsettled, increasing the need for the reassurance of career support and helping enhancement of continued employability.

*Worklife Pty Ltd has combined all the elements mentioned in this article into an Intranet-based product, Worklife's **CareerMaxing™**. Enquiries about its availability, demonstration facility, costs, etc. are encouraged.*

What is career planning self-responsibility?

As people increasingly accept their employer's message—'You are now in charge of your own career'—their expectations rise for that same employer to provide information, tools and resources to carry this out.

Personal career planning can be expressed in many ways:

- to learn about who I am in view of the changes occurring around and within me
- to confirm what I already know
- to identify what I have accomplished, value and what is transferable
- to decide on a future worklife focus
- to maintain, even extend, the importance of work in my living and to link my career actions to my passion and commitment
- to develop my skills at communicating what I seek and believe I merit to those who employ me, taking care to link my expectations to their needs and objectives

These are based on established career theory that effective career problem solving and decision making depend on specific elements of self-knowledge, job role knowledge, decision making skills and metacognitions (self-talk, self-awareness, personal control and monitoring).

In addition, a viable career system helps users understand the meaning of their most satisfying life experiences, i.e. helping

connect with their deeper motivation—powerful for finding their best work role mix. Also to make sense of the changes in their life stages and the personal shifts those experiences bring about. An electronic career service design should allow adequately for this life management content dimension.

"Access is valuable only when something worthwhile is accessed"

Jim Sampson, Professor Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling & Career Development, Florida State University

Who benefits from electronic career systems

We know that retaining and motivating people can make or break a business or an organisation. We know people are complex and their primary wants, values, preferred skills and other attributes shift as they journey through life and employment. Ways of helping people pause, examine, reflect in a non-threatening, unhurried, privacy-assured context can only produce results beneficial to the organisation.

By providing an electronic system resource we would expect employees to:

- bring their full energy and focus to the work they do
- be enthusiastic about working
- serve customers—internal and external—well

The principal facilities are:

- it is a career development resource that can be accessed and used by staff at their

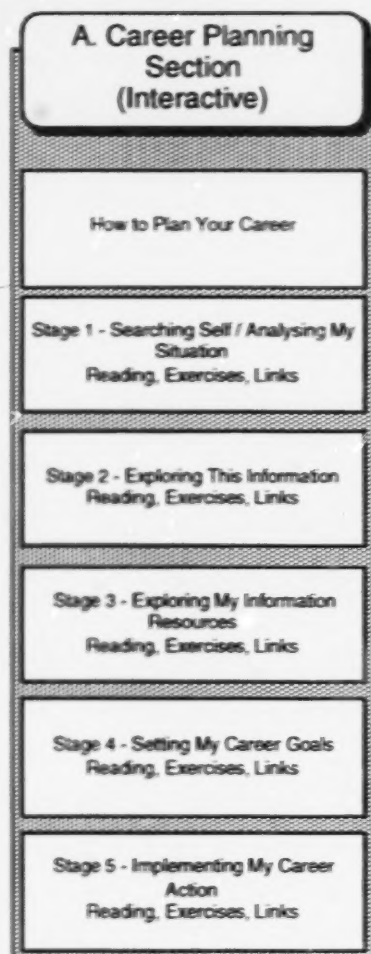
workstation or downloaded and used on their own PC at home. This avoids the need for travel and attendance at other equivalent learning events

- it is a time flexible resource, i.e. staff can use it when it suits them
- no training or manual is required to use and benefit from on-line delivery
- staff can be kept up-to-date with the latest trends in managing their own careers and relevant topics of interest
- the user's progressive responses provide a catalyst for communication between the individual and their manager
- it provides a means of broadcasting and maintaining the message that career development is an important company initiative
- it enables in-company career-related information and procedures (e.g. internal vacancies) to be linked to the career support program content
- it reaches wherever the Intranet reaches—quickly, easily, cost effectively

Variations in individual readiness

Users will vary in terms of readiness for career development training and career options decision making, and implementing next career action step. Hence facilities for email and/or telephone coaching need to be built in for those requiring assistance. Also a screen detailing where face-to-face help can be accessed within

Figure 1



or external to the employment environment.

There will also be variations in individual personality, learning styles and experience with screen-based learning. For example, for an individual with Holland's Social type dominant, the Intranet may be inadequate to provide the interactive, reinforcing and modelling conditions necessary to maintain motivation for screen interaction throughout the career support process. Conversely a dominant Investigative type is likely to access and use career services delivered in this mode eagerly.

Screen designs can make locating information easy but also recognise that advice needs to be given about how new information relates to the career planning process, e.g. explaining that internal job vacancy information can be used to identify job targets. (What is obvious to career counsellors and HRM staff is not always obvious to users.) Care needs to be taken with having fewer links rather than a profusion, as users could become overwhelmed with information and abandon the process.

Confidentiality of users' personal data and responses must be preserved and potential users made confident that this is so. One way is by a facility for the user to download Word files and work on their career planning in a separate file or hard copy form.

Electronic career service design

The core content outline of the system designed by Worklife is shown in Figure 1. The origin is print materials delivered in one-to-one format or workshops, commencing in 1984 and being refined continually since. The content has consequently undergone 'field testing' with many hundreds of adults across many industries and occupational sectors. It comprises carefully sequenced, structured exercises and readings that enable the employee to clarify their preferred career direction progressively and prepare to implement it.

Stage 1 starts with self-analysis where the user assesses their interests, values, preferred skills, audits their primary wants, and examines their career history

for clues as to what really matters to them.

Stage 2 helps them explore this information, synthesise the data and interpret the results, isolating among many aspects the skills they are most motivated to use and the work settings which bring out their best work.

Stage 3 guides the user to source information external to self which has a bearing on their career determination. This comprises data within and external to their current employment environment.

Stage 4 helps them make decisions on options that have been revealed—a stage which daunts many in the process but is helped by the decision learning design features.

Stage 5 concerns creating a career development strategy and action plan linked to the organisation's needs and realities. Employees use this as the foundation for discussions and negotiating with their manager.

B. Life Planning Section (Interactive)

This is an interactive component which allows the employee to undertake a broader life review using a self-help on-line resource. It comprises a series of structured exercises and readings which enable the employee to clarify their broader life needs, examine work/life balance, establish life goals and prepare themselves for well considered action.

C. Employee Resources Section

This comprises a series of publications, question and answer formats, and articles on career and life management topics that the user can access, as well as a bookshop with ordering facility. Links to other forms of career support (i.e. internal or external) are highlighted.

D. HRM/Line Managers' Support Section

This comprises a series of guidance, recommendations and articles for the primary internal helpers in the organisation, i.e. line managers, project managers, combined with a bookshop and mentor list from which additional resources can be drawn.

E. Employer's Data Section

This recognises that at different points in their career action step planning, a user will need to access information from the employer such as project role descriptions or internal contacts. Company information of this nature can be linked to the appropriate items in the main Career Planning and Life Planning modules.

Service responsibilities

The career systems author / provider customises the Intranet career service site in consultation with the organisation for program content, functionality and user appeal refinements.

The employer is responsible for:

- a. reviewing and approving the customised design
- b. loading the relevant data diskettes onto their file server
- c. creating links between the career support system and other human resource information sites on the Intranet site
- d. establishing marketing and communication strategies for release of the on-line service to employees
- e. maintaining the operability of the site once it has been established on the file server

Service monitoring

A system such as described needs continual management. Events, communication sessions, internal publicity, user success stories, i.e. how I benefited, are some of the ingredients of this management task. Others can be:

- a task force planning day for internal marketing and promotion of the career system
- regular survey of users to assess ease of use and appeal and drive future modifications
- on-going update of content through modification of existing material and addition of new information

- on-line help desk support to employees to assist them with the system use and helpful tips on how to implement their findings
- an HRM staff skilling seminar in career coaching support to strengthen the capability of internal assistance to employees

Service effectiveness

Computer-based career systems allow recurrent and browsing behaviours—both essential to qualitative decision making.

Cost effectiveness in system delivery is concerned with offering services that have the greatest likelihood of meeting employees' perceptions of their needs at the lowest possible cost while maximising the number who can access them. For user effectiveness to be achieved, the system must deal with the **content dimension**, i.e. all the complex factors involved in making a career determination and the **process dimension**, i.e. the sequence and detail of steps in making informed choices.

Short-changing on either will result in limited outcomes and jeopardise the system's effectiveness—a design challenge when one knows that employees have multiple needs which vary from individual to individual.

WORKLIFE™

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